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## Poetry, prose, pornography and politics: the eventful life and recent verse of Uładzimir Niaklajeu

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## POETRY, PROSE, PORNOGRAPHY AND POLITICS: THE EVENTFUL LIFE AND RECENT VERSE OF UŁADZIMIR NIAKLAJEŨ

Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ (b. 1946) is the most gifted Belarusian poet of his generation, who at the time of writing is known far beyond literature as one of the authoritarian president's political prisoners.<sup>1</sup> This study of his poetry since the mid-1990s, the peak of his literary achievement so far, is preceded by a brief account of his career from poetry to prose, his voluntary exile, and then what might be called political and philosophical semi-pornography, followed, disastrously, by active politics. Whatever happens in the often grotesque and appalling situation in Belarus in the 21st century, Niaklajeŭ's poetry, which has been translated into some languages,<sup>2</sup> will live on as exceptionally imaginative, richly inventive and strikingly distinctive.

The start of this poet's career was as unusual as it was remarkably flattering: a set of his poems in Russian was requested by the prestigious Molodaia Gvardiia publishers in Moscow, but Niaklajeŭ rejected this tempting offer in order to write in Belarusian, producing his first book of verse, *Adkryćcio* in 1976, rapidly followed by a prize-winning collection, *Vynachodcy viatrou* (1979). Though always abundant in imagery and adventurous in form, some of Niaklajeŭ's early poems reflect youthful Soviet enthusiasms, rather than more philosophical or personal themes. Indeed, his early work is probably nearer than that of any other Belarusian to the tribune poetry that was so popular in Russia of the Thaw. Also unusual in this context is Niaklajeŭ's humour and bitter irony, even sarcasm, found not only in numerous poems but especially in his prose. With time, however, his poetry became increasingly sophisticated, albeit introspective and formally simple, one particular landmark being the outstanding

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<sup>1</sup> In part of an early poem characteristically concerned with speed and movement, 'Daroha daroh' (1978), the young Niaklajeŭ envisaged slowing down as a form of imprisonment: 'Бойся руху свайго заповольнення, / Заповольненне – як знявольненне': Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ, *Vynachodcy viatrou*, Minsk 1979, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> The main Russian translations are: *Mestnoe vremia* (1983), *Veda* (1989), *Zvezda Polyn'* (1991), and, very recently, *Okno* (2010).

collection *Prošča* (1996) followed by another remarkable book of verse, *Tak* (2004).<sup>3</sup> Some of his earliest poems from *Adkryćcio*, like ‘Ty voblakam płyła...’, for example, are truly memorable but is not until his cycle ‘Naskrož’ that we encounter the full force of his sarcasm in a section, ‘Natchnieńnie’, where he writes scathingly about graphomaniacs who lack any genuine inspiration, comparing them to taps, and their traditional forms, sonnets, madrigals and rondos, to plumbers’ subjects that stink like lavatories.

Much of Niaklajeŭ’s prose also displays sarcasm, notably in the entertaining long story ‘Vieža’ (1988) which mocks the backwardness of Soviet attitudes towards foreigners, and particularly in his anonymously published novel or *romančyk* (a pun on one of the many words for penis, incidentally) *Łabuch* (2003), where the philosophical elements attracted less attention than the extreme, sometimes fanciful, descriptions of sexual escapades,<sup>4</sup> and the frank and utterly disrespectful picture of the authoritarian regime and, indeed, its opponents (curiously, in view of Niaklajeŭ’s later experiences). A short quotation will give the flavour:

Тыя, хто ўладарыў апошнімі гадамі – ні прэзідэнт, ні хеўра ягоная – нічым мне не заміналі. Яны не надта мне падабаліся, выпірала з іх нахабная пыха людзей, ято з гразі выскачылі ў князі, але і тыя, хто тузаўся з імі, каб скінуць, не выглядалі вытанчанай шляхтай. Нацыяналісты, камуністы, патрыёты, незалежнікі – усе былі для мяне на адзін капыл (*Łabuch*, p. 47)

In 2009 there appeared a collection of nearly all of his prose (much of it written in exile), works displaying great facility with dialogue, variety of theme and much scathingly vivid characterization.

Niaklajeŭ first went to Finland in 1990 at the invitation of the PEN Club in Helsinki and, unlike many exiles, was able to visit Belarus freely at first. His poems set to music had always been popular, but after his departure such songs, although they continued to be played on the radio, were announced without mentioning the poet’s name, an old Soviet trick. Niaklajeŭ’s recent venture into politics, with an ostensibly reasonable yet clearly provocative slogan, ‘Skaży praŭdu’, resulted in his beating and imprisonment. Such events had what might be regarded as a precedent when, elected Chair of the Writers’ Union in 1998, he optimistically tried to arrange a dialogue between the creative intelligentsia and

<sup>3</sup> On a copy of *Tak* sent to the present writer in October 2004, he described it as ‘possibly [my] last book of poetry, as prose encroaches’.

<sup>4</sup> One short example will have to suffice: Chapter 2 describes a thirteen-year-old boy being sucked off by a student nurse and being shortly afterwards trapped with his penis inside her and taken to hospital in that condition: Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ, *Łabuch*, Minsk 2003 (hereafter *Łabuch*), pp. 17–18.

political power, which, however, ended in anger and acrimony. By then the country's intransigent president had already set his ruthless course. The jeu d'esprit, *Łabuch*, does not need further description here, but certainly falls, at least partially, into the genre of pornography, a genre into which a number of (mainly middle-aged male) Belarusian writers have been tempted.<sup>5</sup> For all its scandal and humour, it is not for this book that Niaklajeŭ will be best remembered but for his sparkling, richly imaginative and at times virtuosic although never ostentatious mature poetry.

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Before turning to the pinnacle of Niaklajeŭ's poetic work in *Prošča* and *Tak*, it is worth briefly considering the writing that led up to this point. The theme of speed, movement and change has already been mentioned. World War II figures extensively in his early verse, if one considers that Niaklajeŭ was born after it had ended. One of his best-known poems on this subject is 'Daviedka ab naradžeńni' (1978–79) where he declares the fate of his father and mother to be his direct connection with war. This long, almost epic, autobiographical poem uses for the central anecdote partly dramatized dialogue. There are also many love poems, some of them utterly memorable, like 'Małanka' and the fearsomely bleak 'Tvaje voki, jak vokny balnicy...', both of which use the image of lightning. Another recurrent theme is the poet's feeling of responsibility to the people of Belarus, as may be seen in these two lines from one of his best long poems, 'Naskroź': 'Паэзія – адчуванне / Адказнасці за народ.'<sup>6</sup>

The above miniscule description of Niaklajeŭ's early and middle-period works hardly gives an impression of the great contrasts in his poems, moving as they do swiftly from the quietly reflective to the vigorously emphatic. Nor does it give an impression of the breadth of his thematic range. It may, however, be worth mentioning in conclusion that although most of Niaklajeŭ's poetic work is set firmly in the present or recent past, he occasionally turns to fantastic or 'magic' themes, an example being 'Harbun' from the *Naskroź* collection, or, more extremely, 'Dambaj' from *Znak achovy*, in which the poet visiting Georgia meets the Renaissance Latin poet Mikoła Husoŭski (1470 (?) – 1533 [?]) in the mountains of the Caucasus. Even if he had ceased writing verse in the late 1980s, Niaklajeŭ would still have established a very considerable poetic reputation, but what came later was of a different order of excellence, confirming his status and heritage beyond any doubt.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief account of this novel see Arnold McMillin, *Writing in a Cold Climate: Belarusian Literature from the 1970s to the Present Day*, London 2010, pp. 599–602.

<sup>6</sup> Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ, *Naskroź*, Minsk 1985, p. 106.

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The collection *Prošča* was acclaimed by the acute literary commentator and poet Michaś Skobla as one of the best books of poetry written in the twentieth century,<sup>7</sup> and it certainly is an outstanding achievement. As has been suggested, not all Niaklajeŭ's early works were homogeneous in shape and form, but *Prošča* is a remarkably well organized collection, consisting as it does of four sections, each of which is given the title of a narrative poem that is preceded by a quantity of lyrics with loosely related themes. The predominant feature of these poems is their mature, reflective simplicity. The four sections are entitled 'Prošča' (the name of a particularly pure and refreshing lake), 'Indyja', 'Zona' and 'Sarakaviny'.

The first of them begins with a fantastic historical ballad about a legless bell ringer in a lakeside church tower, watching out for any danger and, at the same time, acting as the eyes and ears as well as the conscience of his people. His love for the blacksmith's daughter Miłavica is thwarted by the local prince who, in turn, is challenged by other princes, resulting in war and extensive bloodshed. The local prince becomes a kite, and Miłavica a swallow, whilst the church and bell tower escape the carnage at the bottom of the lake, implying the tower's role as guardian of the land's cultural and moral values. Towards the end of this romantic tale Niaklajeŭ writes:

Калі ты званар ці калі ты паэт,  
Жыві на званіцы.

And the following stanza ends thus:

Калі ты паэт ці калі ты званар,  
Ты лішні, ты вольны.<sup>8</sup>

The role and position of the poet is considered many times in this course of this most personal and heartfelt as well as formally polished collection. The first of the lyrics in 'Prošča' is an imaginative picture of the difficulty of the poet's task, comparing it to sewing a mist or weaving a cloud, particularly unrewarding, as no one will read the result. Niaklajeŭ's attitude to the theatre is notoriously negative, as may be seen in his 'Teatralnaja bałada', written in the late 1970s where he criticizes the pitifully small, ignorant and uninterested audience at a performance of *Hamlet*. He returns to the theme in *Prošča*, where a verse ends with the apparently throwaway lines:

<sup>7</sup> Michaś Skobla, *Krasa i sila: Antaŭhija bielaruskaj paezii XX stahodździa*, Minsk 2003, p. 577.

<sup>8</sup> Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ, *Prošča*, Minsk 1996 (hereafter *Prošča*), p. 46.

Бог з машины.  
 Малина з куста.  
 І ў малінніку любяцца змеі.  
 (Prošča, p. 26)

In the second section of *Prošča*, 'Indyja', snakes appear to have a less sinister and more ritualistic significance. The narrative poem, written mostly in dialogue with very short lines, depicts the poet in the Himalayas seeking both wisdom and a woman, Maryja, that he has known. He finds her name on a tombstone in the English cemetery in Calcutta, and learns that, centuries before, her heart had been given to a(nother) poet in the uniform of an English officer and with the habits of such a person abroad. The latter has, however, departed from a life of violence and pleasure and become obsessed with Hinduism, of which he aspires to be a missionary in his 'good old world'. The poem begins, with great use of assonance and alliteration, in the world of dreams, as the narrator awakening falls at the feet of a Swami (later also named a monk – *manach*). The saintly wise man's message appears to be that people should not try to adopt the religions of others but find the truth through their own faiths. The Englishman, a snob of course, dares to question his God, and resists the criticism implicit in the Swami's repeated question as to whether he has known Maryja. India itself, about which Niaklajeŭ seems to know a great deal, is presented imaginatively as an eternal country central to the spiritual life of the planet. When Maryja is asked where she will meet with her lover if he dies, she replies that it will be where there is lightning in a temple warmed by lotuses and where Vishna is entwined with snakes, a place where India is both a planet and the rest of the world. When he insists on asking her what she has seen on high, with God, she tells him:

<Нічога там – адна дарога  
 Ды зор ахвярнае святло...>  
 – А ты б хацеў, каб там было  
 Што-небудзь? – запытаўся Свамi.  
 Каб Індыя была...  
 (Prošča, p. 91)

At the end of the poem, on the poet's return path, several of India's mythical and sacred flora and fauna accompany him as this memorable and hugely imaginative poem comes to an end:

Гаруда, белы Божы птах,  
 Сарваў з Мандары

кветку сому  
 І кінуў на зваротны шлях.  
 (*Prošča*, p. 92)

Although none of the lyrics in the ‘Indyja’ section directly presages the specific Indian themes of the narrative poem, many of them share some of its aura, particularly a short verse that contains in embryo several of the *paema*’s elements such as a quest, personified clouds, and love, ‘Adchyniecca vada ad ziamli...’. In most of these lyrics love and dreams play a considerable role, as, indeed, they do in the *paema*. Such instances include ‘U našych snach było kamu pryśnica...’, and the already mentioned ‘Tvaje vočy, jak vokny balnicy...’. The ‘Indyja’ lyrics echo the poet’s fascination with birds, although they are less exotic than the ones mentioned earlier; they seem to have an undoubted connection with the infinity of the sky, and lightning is again prominent. In ‘Nieba zastaŭlena pastkami...’, however, he adopts a different tone that is more intimate and, indeed, domestic, writing, ‘Воблакі спыггя дзюбкам’: *Prošča*, p. 59.

Niaklajeŭ’s response to the Chernobyl tragedy in his long poem ‘Zona’ is very effective in its alternation of personal reaction and apportionment of blame (mainly to God), and contains a particularly touching picture of an old woman who has been evacuated. Amongst the many fine works of literature evoked by the disaster, Niaklajeŭ’s lament is far from the least haunting. In form it is more varied than the previous two *paemy* in *Prošča*, as no doubt befits the subject matter. The simple opening is a striking disclaimer of personal responsibility:

Я не парушыў, хоць знаўся з віной,  
 Ні чалавечых, ні Боскіх законаў.

...зона...

(*Prošča*, p. 127)

God appears many times in the poem with His name italicized and without a capital letter; the poet’s attitude is both intimate and reproachful, and His face is more than once described as iron. The poet cannot obtain a satisfactory reply to his insistent questions and eventually describes himself as a fly buzzing around the ear of the Almighty, but gets no satisfaction even when he sits down to eat with what he calls the God of zones. At the end of ‘Zona’ the old woman has lost her belief and Niaklajeŭ effectively uses the technique of a countdown to depict graphically the progress towards the explosion, with God at the end portrayed, not for the only time, as a child, observing events from a cloud.

The lyric poems in ‘Zona’ treat embryonically or indirectly many of the themes in the narrative poem. God is again challenged in various ways. In ‘Idaŭ’,

for instance, He is depicted as an idol that despises the poet. In 'Ziemlatrus', an earthquake stands for all the world's disasters, and the poet challenges God to say whether he is responsible for everything or whether there is a superior being that ordains these misfortunes. National sense of identity forms the subject of several verses like 'Mutacyja' where Niaklajeŭ demands to know when historical awareness will be aroused again: 'У глухату ўпіраецца і зрок / Каму ягоным слыхам стаць і зрокам' (*Prošča*, p. 102), observing in conclusion that peoples are not created deliberately, but by natural development: 'Народы не здараюцца знарок' (*Prošča*, p. 103). Lack of national identity is also the theme of 'Nie nazvanych nas niama...', and in 'Što zatužyli, voi, mužčynu...' he refers to a people that cannot see, hoping, however, that future generations will be more aware. 'Народ, што прамаўчаў сваю дзяржаву' (*Prošča*, p. 109) is the memorable last line of 'Prabačač durniu. I darujuč katu...'. In another of these verses, 'Точыць стацонаје мол', the poet dares to hope that one day the people's voice will be returned, an idea expressed even more vividly in 'Маўклівы митынх', which ends with two lines that, despite everything, also offer a glimpse of hope, albeit in a terrible image of people with mouths tightly shut, peering out from a crowd: 'І ўпершыню, маўкліва сцяўшы рот, / З натоўпу глянуў люд. Амаль народ.' (*Prošča*, p. 118). As in 'Zona', Niaklajeŭ often asks what Belarus has done to deserve the disasters that have befallen it: strong examples are 'Razboj. Vajna i znoŭ vajna...' and 'Na mahile Skurata Maluty...', the latter of which ends with two memorable lines: 'Гэта кроў векавую таропка / Засыпае скалечаны снег' (*Prošča*, p. 120). Finally may be mentioned a poem, 'Bijahrafija', that, in the form of a selective national chronicle, mentions the fateful years of Belarus's political history in the last century: 1930, 1931, 1953, 1954, 1957 and 1964, all, of course, long before the Chernobyl disaster.

Strong as such poems are, the first of them, 'Bielaruskaja pieśnia' stands out as one of Niaklajeŭ's fiercest and best pieces of verse in any genre. Using the basic image of a song as Belarus's identity, and then, presenting it through a series of virtuosic images as a disgusting old woman, he ends unforgettably by calling this song his lover, wife, beggar, idiot and sister:

Беларуская песня

Тая даўняя песня...

Яе ўжо няма каму помніць

Ды і што ўспамінаць! – там нішчымны адчай ды нуда,

Там галечка з галеч, шэры хлеб ды рудая вада,

Там не паліцца печ, і снягамі завальвае комін.

Праз гады і вякі колкі вецер штурхаецца ў спіну

На няўцямных шляхах, па якіх тая песня брыла.



Я адрыну яе!..

Ды як толькі збіраю сябрыну –  
Звар’яцелай жабрачкай кульгае яна да стала.

З-пад яе лахманаў струпяннё праступае на скуры,  
Таямнічыя знакі і клеймы распустваў і здрад.  
Чорнай ямінай рота яна выдыхае панура:  
– Можна ведаць наперад

толькі тое,  
што помніш назад.

Закрычу захмялела <Бадзяжніца! Ведьма старая!  
До па мне галасіць — і не сват я табе, і не брат!  
Паўтары, што сказаў!..>

І панура яня паўтарае:

– Можна ведаць наперад

толькі тое,  
што помніш назад.

[...]

І за рэхам жыцця, што гукаецца брэхам сабачым,  
Зноў я ўчую яе — і прымрою ў абдымках Хрыста...

За мяне яна моліцца, просіць,  
па мне яна плача –

Палубоўніца... жонка... жабрачка... вар’ятка... сястра.  
(*Prošča*, pp. 99–100)

The fourth section of *Prošča* is entitled ‘Sarakaviny’, meaning the memorial service held forty days after a death. The *paema* of this section echoes many of the themes of earlier parts of the book, and is hardly less passionate than ‘Zona’. It is permeated with expressions of guilt, a topos in Niaklajeŭ’s work as a whole, and begins with an ambiguous admission:

Віноўнай быць душа  
хіба павінна,  
Не цямячы, у чым яе віна?  
(*Prošča*, p. 167)

Neither the quick nor the dead can rid themselves of culpability. Later the point is reinforced when this ever-present feeling is presented not as some kind of support but as an imprisoning wall:

Апоры ты не знойдзеш у віне,  
Няма яе, бо ўся яна – з нічога.  
[...]

Як цёмна скрозь! За мной, перада мною  
Сцяна віны. Астрожная сцяна.  
(*Proščca*, p. 176)

This *paema* is perhaps the most philosophical in the book, as the poet, faced with the memorial of the dead, finds himself alone in the universe, an insignificant part of a continuum. To the question ‘Хто мы ў Суствеце [...] Хто ў Вечнасці мы?’ (*Proščca*, p. 172) he finds no response but only chains, as the planets, stars and words all rotate unceasingly. No one is new, neither the judge nor the executioner. The continuity seems utterly futile. God, who is presented here as a schoolteacher (*Proščca*, p. 178), fingers the links of mankind’s chain, of which the poet is only one, like a rosary (*Proščca*, p. 175), an image that recurs later in a different form when the poet finds himself lonely and alienated in the corner of a church fingering his words, like a rosary:

...У пуштаце перад усім пустым  
Стаяў ты ў храме,  
да ўсяго гатовы,  
Дык я прыйшоў з чужым – так рушыў з тым,  
Нібы ружанец, перабраўшы словы.  
(*Proščca*, p. 180)

It is only three quarters way into ‘Sarakaviny’ that the actual memorial begins, with what is known in Ireland as a wake. Though the table is poor, its contents and decorations come from various parts of Belarus, creating a truly national commemoration. The poet’s main concern appears to be that he and his country, represented by some of its most evocative names, be not forgotten, and he calls for everyone to return to the chairs around the memorial table. Mortality, loneliness, anxiety for the identity of his country, the search for personal happiness, awareness of the shortness of life and the eternity of the universe are all prominent themes in this moving poem, but above all is the recurrent questioning of the nature of guilt, and so it seems appropriate that it should end with the injunction to judge: ‘судзіце’ (*Proščca*, p. 183).

The shorter poems in ‘Sarakaviny’ contain several familiar images, such as the cold and empty sky to the horizon, a good example being the first of the set, ‘U šfiernych lustrach płaunych niebaschłau...’. In the second stanza of this strong poem flashes of lightning enter the emptiness, coming between birth and death:

Свет шырыцца да незнаятых ніш  
 І пустату закідвае насеннем,  
 Што прарасце маланкамі паміж  
 Самаз'яўленнем і самазнікненнем.  
 (*Prošča*, p. 147)

Several verses treat unhappiness, not surprisingly in the context of 'Sarakaviny', 'Chto pa čym markocicca ŭ žurbie...', for instance, or fear (as in 'Šastaje viecier pa dachu...'), and lamenting in various highly personalized forms, as in 'Pakinuŭšy ŭsviata na ŭsviacie..' and, particularly affectingly, 'Vyšaŭ letam...'. All these poems relate directly or indirectly to remembering the dead, as does a down to earth verse 'Vosień. Sivizna dy pazałota...' where the poet writes about how good it is to sit and drink to the memory of a loved-one, speaking of loneliness and filling glasses in the same breath. Humour and a pun on words (homonyms are not uncommon in Niaklajeŭ's poetry) for wine and guilt are found in 'Dobra być ni baćkam i ni synam..':

Добра быць ні бацькам і ні сынам,  
 І ні дзядзькам, і ні братам быць.  
 Анікому нічарта не вінным  
 Жыць у краме, у адзеле вінным,  
 Дзе ў чарзе – уся радня стаіць.  
 (*Prošča*, p. 156)

Amongst other elements that recur in the loose context of remembering the dead are madness and loneliness. In one pathetic poem, 'Var'jat', the madman of the title, a figure to be pitied rather than despised, can only dig a mound for his dead brother, and the poem ends pathetically. Loneliness or, at least, being alone in 'Adzin' is, unusually for Niaklajeŭ, far from being an existential disadvantage. Alone you are more than just one person, the poet suggests, and you may be able to help God to sew up (another recurrent image) the emptiness of the universe. Several of the verses here such as 'Hulnia', 'Matylok' and 'Haŭbiatnia' are apparently unrelated to memorials. The last poem of the set, however, 'Strumienicca pa žyľach chaładok...' includes many familiar elements, including homonymic play, freezing horizons and remembrance of the dead. The first three stanzas repeat the word *zaviersšana* implying the completion of life, and the verse ends with two striking images to describe memory – as a fluttering butterfly or as a snake squirming as it is impaled on a pitchfork. *Prošča* is a truly outstanding achievement, rich in form, imagery, lexicon and ideas. Had Niaklajeŭ written nothing else, this collection would have stood alone as a true monument to a poet of unusual power and originality.

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Niaklajeŭ's most recent book of verse, *Tak*, is divided into three parts consisting of, firstly, short poems under the title 'Pryśniłaś, što jość na śviecie Boh', followed by 'subjects' (*siužety*) with the title 'Ky-hy', and, thirdly, narrative poems entitled 'Ajčyna. A čamu?' The last of these titles is as provocative as the first, whilst the second is a phonetically unattractive bird caw. Many of the poems in the first part touch on themes that also figured extensively in this poet's earlier work. Unsurprisingly, God is found in many of them. In the opening verse, 'Da Bohu ūsio pieramaučau...', for instance, the poet has borne the Almighty's presence in silence, even interesting himself in the Devil for his 'sixth book', but is surprised in the darkness of night to see stern letters facing him. In the next verse, 'Da Boha drohkaja daroha...', Niaklajeŭ talks of 'seeking God everywhere, because He is everywhere', ending with the realization that he is really seeking for himself. Another short verse, 'Anioły' describes, with elementary dialogue, his attempts, intercepted by three angels, to approach God. Some other poems on quasi-religious themes, such as 'Apostał', are humorous, as is a poem, 'Noč – i d'jabał hraje na trubie...', in which the Devil is depicted as cavorting with shameless witches.

Niaklajeŭ's poems on exile, emigration and freedom are generally very bleak. 'Emihranty', for instance, ends: 'Як добра ўсё ж, што мы памрэм / Прад тым, як жыць далей,'<sup>9</sup> going on to envy the fate of a homeless bird, and ending with the following stanza that like many other of these poems looks towards death:

На чужыне і дома – усе мы ў адной чарадзе,  
Што не ведае межаў, ляціць і радзее паволі  
Млечным Шляхам, дарогай, якая няўмольна вядзе  
Ад няволі зямной да нязнанай нябеснае волі.

(*Tak*, p. 50)

Another such poem is 'Jaśče ničoha nie było...', and in 'Vola' we learn that nobody can become truly free, for even when freedom seems to have been gained, it is bound to be lost again: 'І кожны з нас здабудзе волю двойчы, / І двойчы згубіць волю кожны з нас'; the poem's last lines spell out how this comes about: 'Адзін раз воля – калі ты з нябыту, / Другі раз воля – калі ты ў нябыт' (*Tak*, p. 14).<sup>10</sup> Loneliness figures in many of these poems, as it does in the work of numerous other Belarusian poets. Despair is a constant theme, one of the most

<sup>9</sup> Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ, *Tak*, Miensk 2004 (hereafter *Tak*), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> A different version of this poem is Niaklajeŭ's contribution to an anthology of poems on freedom: Valancina Aksak (compiler), *Verš na svabodu*, Prague 2002, p. 340.

striking, albeit disgusting, poems is ‘I heta noč...’ where all life is described as a mere cigarette stuck to someone’s lips. This is the second stanza:

І гэты свет, жыццё ўсё гэта.  
 І ўсё, што ў ім было –  
 нібы  
 дапаленая  
 цыгарэта,  
 прылепленая  
 да губы.

(*Tak*, p. 56)

The futility of life is a constant theme, and the verse ‘Byŭ ja – jak i ŭse byli...’ is an ostensibly simple but strong example:

Быў я – як і ўсе былі.  
 Жыў – за што плачу.  
 Гнеў нябёс і спеў зямлі  
 Зведаў. Бачыў. Чуў.

І нібыта меў свой лёс –  
 І не меў яго...  
 Спеў зямлі і гнеў нябёс  
 Быў ні для чаго.

(*Tak*, p. 30)

The headlong passing of time forms the subject of several poems. In ‘Usio, što pranosicca mima...’, he attempts to assuage his feeling of helplessness and despair by creating a miracle – buying a tramp a pint of beer. In several poems, like ‘Što viernešsa – sam nie vieryŭ...’, for instance, he creates the same feeling of human insignificance by images from the natural world. Another example is to be found in ‘Dola’, where the lexicon and imagery are particularly powerful in their simplicity:

Доля

*Наталі*

Вецер коціцца па полі –  
 У зямлі шукае долі.  
 Доля рвецца з цёмных нетраў  
 І сябе шукае ў ветры.

Вецер. Поле. Доля. Дым –  
 Скрозь пустое  
 У пустым.

Мы ў жыцці сваім зямным  
 Возьмем толькі ў дыме дым.  
 Тое возьмем мы ў агні,  
 Што сякера ў камяні.

(*Tak*, p. 62)

Other familiar themes treated in these poems include war, death and destiny, the topos of a chain (in ‘Łancuh’ described as the poet’s fate), the sewing of clouds and madness in ‘Hołkaj znoŭku serca mieciać!..’ where the poet declares, with delightful humour, that he is demurely growing mad at the silence of nature: ‘Вар’яцею ціха-ціха. / Так, як трэба. Пакрысе’ (*Tak*, p. 29). Truly shocking, however, is a short poem, ‘Strach’, which implies that Belarus’s dreadful historical experiences has led to the population’s inability to really want freedom, but, as slaves (*chalopy*), needing only the Slav equivalent of a carrot and stick:

Страх

У краях, збітых войнамі  
 Так, што страх не злячыць,  
 Нават воля не вольная  
 Вольна душы лучыць.

Там няма ў яе вернікаў.  
 А халопы адны, –  
 Прагнуць пугі і перніка,  
 А не волі яны.

(*Tak*, p. 18)

The ‘Subjects’ of the second part of *Tak* begin with an impressionistic description of the road from Prague to Warsaw, ‘Ky-hy’, accompanied by the ugly cawing of the title. In the next poem, ‘Vulica Varšauskaj bitvy’, blood and vodka seem to flow eternally during the Polish-Soviet War, in which Piłsudski and his followers did not recognize the Polish flag: ‘А сцяг бел-чырвоны / нічый і ніякі’ (*Tak*, p. 66). The relationship between Belarus, Litva and Poland is treated extensively elsewhere in this book, which is particularly rich in original imagery. For instance, in ‘Vulica 3 maja’ the Polish problem of General Jaruzelski (here called Jeruzelski) is compared to a tie that is out of fashion but whose knot still holds firm. In another verse, ‘Apošni karol’, Polish political

dreams are described as being as broad as the bed of Catherine the Great, whilst in ‘Novy sviat’, dedicated to the translator Česlaŭ Seniuch, Warsaw is depicted as a woman’s blood-stained white dress during repressions immediately after the death of Stalin, as we read in the following quatrain:

Во ўсіх часах, хоць жылы рві,  
 Свае законы:  
 Сукенка белая ў крыві –  
 Сцяг бел-чырвоны.

(*Tak*, p. 77)

The closing three lines of this poem declare that the woman in white is Warsaw herself. In ‘P’janka’ Belarus, which is never far from the poet’s mind, is described as a country where there is no reason not to drink, whilst in ‘Prymrocca, jak praz tuman...’, the Belarusian language appears to Niaklajeŭ, ever specific, through a fountain in the station square in Lviv. ‘Ucioki’, a poem about another refugee from his country, indeed the ultimate example of exile for Belarusians, concerns the fate of Adam Mickiewicz. Finally may be mentioned a poem, ‘Padarunak’, whose more existential theme is treated as a dialogue between a poet and an old man who begins very directly: ‘<Жыць табе не надаела? / Не агоркнуў белы свет?>’ (*Tak*, p. 69). As they drink together life seems unbearably tedious. Eventually they exchange mementoes: the poet receives a book, and the old man a knife. The last six lines of the poem begin with the two quoted above, and enquire insistently whether the poet has resisted the things that make life terrible. This verse ends tragically, in a memorable image:

<Жыць табе не надаела?  
 Не агоркнуў белы свет?

Ну, спрацівеў?! Надаела?!  
 Ну, скажы, скажы, скажы?!>

І пытанне крывянела  
 І сцякла па нажы.

(*Tak*, p. 71)

Strong as these ten verses or subjects are, they are more than matched by the two narrative poems that conclude Niaklajeŭ’s ‘last’ book of poetry. The first, ‘Palanez’ was written in Warsaw and Helsinki between September 1999 and February 2001. As the title implies, it is about Poland, and takes the form of an imaginary affair between the poet and a pianist and actress, Jabłońska seen in

a picture, whom he imagines as embodying the spirit of this *piakielny raj* (hellish heaven), as he calls the land he is about to leave. This bond of love, despite being with an image or ghost, is touching in its mutual intensity, although early on Niaklajeŭ expands on the banality of the words ‘I love you’. This stanza, taken alone, has been translated into Russian and included in at least one anthology:<sup>11</sup>

‘Ja kocham se...’  
 Ва ўсіх краях,  
 Спрасоння блытаючы мовы,  
 Я гэтых пустыя словы  
 Знаходзіў лёгка на губах:  
 ‘I love you’,  
 <Я люблю вас>

(*Tak*, p. 81)

When they are together she wonders why the poet is so obsessed with Litva, a country whose very existence she doubts, calling the Litviny crazy people, and their land accursed, telling him that his beliefs are more faith than reality:

Ты молішся, як прад абразам,  
 Прад тым, што спалена да тла...  
 Калі ёсць я,  
 калі мы разам,  
 Скажы: нашто табе Літва?

Ну гэта ж прывід...  
 Здань...  
 Трызненне...  
 Ну што – Літва твая? Складзенні?  
 Руіны? Замчышчы? Крґжы?

(*Tak*, p. 84)

The ethereal Jabłońska’s language in speaking about ghosts and apparitions does not seem to strike the poet as ironical, and he responds with a challenge about the identity of Poland, at which Jabłońska spreads her hands like wings over the keyboard expressing the spirit of her country with its nocturnes, mazurkas and polonaises. Centuries fly over the keys like butterflies. The poet feels this magical woman coming closer and then moving away, like the flame of a candle swaying in the wind. The world seems to him to be swaying too, but

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, A.K. Kozhedub and L.N. Turbina (compilers), *Ad veku ŭ vek: Bielaruśskaja paezija / Iz veka v vek: Belorusskaja poezija*, Moscow 2003, pp. 318–19.



when he speaks of passion and death she tells him that the former is no longer fashionable in Poland, and, as for death, the Lord will collect up all the selected ones, musicians, poets, lovers (*Tak*, p. 85). The theme of Belarus as a chimera and Poland as a land with a rich and continuous history is evoked several times in discussions between the musician and poet, which range widely over subjects from continuity of historical past to religion, linguistic stability to political passivity and the respective responses to unfriendly neighbours. Religion also finds a place in his dreams:

Каталіцызм і праваслаўе –  
 Не той жа шлях?  
 <Наш шлях –  
 паміж, –  
 Шапталі сны, –  
 не берагамі,  
 А рэчышчам, ракой самой.  
 Пакінь усё і кроч за намі...>  
 (*Tak*, p. 98)

Poland is represented by Jabłońska herself and such other well-known figures as Andrzej Wajda and Adam Mickiewicz, whilst the poet is visited by the ghosts of leaders and warriors from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania such as Mindaūh, Vitaūh and Jahajła who also appear in his dreams. But their advice or encouragement that he follow the path of the dead, however glorious, is at best ambiguous: ‘Забітых дух – / атрута ў целе’ (*Tak*, p. 96). He undoubtedly loves both countries, and his very touching romance with the spirit of Warsaw in female form, complete with realistic elements of impatience, teasing and mockery, not to mention a car crash due to her wild driving, rings true rather than ethereal. When they part he feels that the world has lost all meaning: ‘Дом сірочы / Нам гэты свет, дзе мы жывём’ (*Tak*, p. 103). The poem had begun with his taking leave from Jabłońska (<Бывай, Яблонская, бывай!>) and ends with him doing the same from the city of Warsaw. This wide-ranging work is a rhapsodic love poem, but devoid of sentimentality and, of course, a romance not only with an imaginary or ghostly figure, but with a whole country, constantly compared to beleaguered Belarus. ‘Pałanez’ is one of the most memorable of all his poems. It is a splendid overall achievement, although its animadversions on national characteristics are unlikely to appeal to all nationally conscious Belarusians (of which Niaklajeŭ is, of course, one), particularly in the context of the section’s provocative heading, ‘The fatherland, but why?..’

The second *paema* in *Tak* has the intriguing title of ‘Łożak pčaly’, and is dedicated to the poet’s mother who, incidentally, figures extensively throughout,

and there are no less than five epigraphs, four of them from his own works. The poem is divided into two parts, ‘Kalavała’ and ‘Śviathor’je’. The first begins by painting a traditional Finnish scene, with a quiet bearded man and a boat on a deserted lake; the interior of the house where the narrator is staying is likewise traditional with family pictures round the walls. Later, however, the clichés about the Finns are challenged: ‘Размашысты ў Фінляндыі народ. / Вясёлы. А усё кажучь, што паньлы’ (*Tak*, p. 132). In the house he meets Kajsa, the eponymous bee, who begins a romance that will last throughout the *paeta* by stinging him: ‘І толькі я абняў яе — куснула, / Каб я не забываўся, што пчала’ (*Tak*, p. 117). Earlier she had been a woman who, having lost her beloved in battle, turned into a bee. Readers of ‘Pałanez’ may not be surprised, after a Polish ghost, to find the narrator in love with a bee-woman who, incidentally, shares the Pole’s partial understanding of his feelings for things Belarusian and likewise expresses her own sceptical distaste:

Ах, што за мова! Колькі звону ў слове!  
А вось – супраць! Авадні ўсе ў замове:

Таго няма! Сяго ёй не стае...  
А як пчала на беларускай мове  
Звініць-пяе!

І не адно звініць... Збірае мёд.  
І не паздзіць пра мову і народ.  
(*Tak*, pp. 220–21)

‘Kalavała’ contains many passages, part paraphrased, part pastiche, from the Finnish epic, the first of them, ‘Jon mnie sam śpiavau pra Sampa...’ from Runo I (p. 118), and the second from Runo III, ‘Śpieŭ duetam’ (p. 121), for example. There are also very many Finnish names in the text, some taking up whole stanzas, without any explanation of who they are (for instance, that beginning ‘Kajsa pčolka zalataja...’ on p. 128).<sup>12</sup> More familiar from other Belarusians abroad is the repeated finding of similarities and parallels between foreign countries and home, in this case specifically Belarusian and Finnish festivals: ‘І там Купалле! Што мне Мітгумары!..’ (*Tak*, p. 131). The poet sets forth northward with Lemminkäinen to try to capture the mystical Sampo mill. There are many peripeteias, including the poet’s burial, but the main features of this work are characteristic of folk poetry, particularly the ubiquitous use of

<sup>12</sup> This is in sharp contrast with, for instance, Alhierd Abuchovič, whose novel *Saroka na ŭbyienicie* (Miensk 2009) contains numerous explanatory commentaries on topics from Brueghel to German trains.

repetition. Also notable is the quotation of passages from his earlier works, one egregious example being the verbatim reproduction of twenty-three lines from ‘Kažuch’ (*Tak*, p. 191). It may also be mentioned here that Niaklajeŭ is very fond of repeating words within poems. Indeed, repetition is a prominent feature in ‘Łoŭak pčaly’ altogether. Between the passages from quasi-*Kalevala*, there is much lively, sometimes comic, dialogue, much of it, but not all, in folk style.

In ‘Śviathor’je’ the bee returns and the improbable couple resume their stormy relationship. One aspect of the narrator’s mother is that she may also represent Belarus, particularly when giving birth: ‘Ой ты, мацёрка-Айчына’ (*Tak*, p. 177). She puts a soul into him and tells him Belarusian, not Finnish, folk tales, some of which are very comic, thanks in part to Niaklajeŭ’s mastery of a variety of verse forms. At times she seems very close to Kajsa who speaks to the poet with the distant voice of his mother (*Tak*, p. 200). The attitude to God in this poem, never formal in Niaklajeŭ, becomes increasingly familiar: he is described as cunning, and it is suggested he may have a drink with Belarusians (*Tak*, p. 188). Śviathor’je itself is burnt to ashes, and the people escape with whatever they can. The narrator hopes to be taken by Kajsa ‘Да жанчыны, да Айчыны’ (*Tak*, p. 216), but the following lines illustrate their usual abusive relationship:

І тут пчала – каня! Ах бляха-муха!..  
 Бадай бы срачка ў залатое бруха  
 Табе, кусачка, сяструха!..

Ну, а цяпер паслухай, засеруха!..  
 (*Tak*, p. 218)

Death, never far away, concludes ‘Łoŭak pčaly’ on a merry note:

А як яшчэ пакінуць гэты свет?..  
 Калі не так?..  
 Са светласцю.  
 Са смехам.

(*Tak*, p. 226)

The book ends with a poem that, after all the linguistic virtuosity, bravado and fun, offers a poetic explanation of the last section’s provocative title and a no less poetic, but unmediated, view of Belarus:

## Ластаўка

1

Айчына. А чаму?  
Глядзіш услед пытанню –  
Як ластаўчынаму  
Палёту, шчабятанню...

2

Дарагое і ёсць дарагое.  
Ува мне –  
там, дзе сэрца тугое  
Ад скразной, непазбыўнай тугі –  
Б'ецца  
ластаўкай берагавою  
Беларусь  
аб свае берагі.

(Tak, p. 227)

Even if, and it must be hoped that they do not, *Prošča* and *Tak* mark the end of Niaklajeў's poetic career, they represent an excellent culmination, both consolidating earlier achievements and also embarking on new paths, particularly in quasi-folk verse. *Ad multos annos*.

**Поэзия, проза, порнография и политика:  
богатая событиями жизнь в последних стихах Владимира Некляева**

В настоящей статье речь идет о двух недавних и, возможно, последних книгах стихов Некляева. «Прошча» состоит из четырех эпических поэм исключительной образности, простота поэтики которых демонстрирует высокую степень искусства поэта. Первая из поэм передает народное сказание, вторая переносит нас в Индию, третья является реакцией на Чернобыль и последствия катастрофы, четвертая является размышлением о разных аспектах смерти. Кроме того здесь содержатся две большие поэмы, первая из которых представляет изысканное восхваление Польши – по сравнению с Белоруссией. Действие другой фантастической поэмы происходит в Финляндии и также обращается к вопросу белорусского национального самосознания. Традиционные приключения героев прерываются длинными цитатами или имитацией Калевалы.